Mackie SA1521 Powered Speakers

BY BILL EVANS

The rapid proliferation of powered speakers has had an effect, at least on this gigger. In fact, with new models coming out seemingly every month, I realized when I sat down to write this review that I have not done a gig with passive speakers and separate amps in almost a year. While early efforts (including one from Mackie) tended to be somewhat underpowered, more models mean more choices and an inevitable trend towards more power and an overall more "pro" sound. The Mackie SA1521 powered speakers are a part of that trend.

The 1521s are anything but wimpy, with 500 total watts (400 LF/100 HF) and weighing in at close to 85 pounds. They are also a chimera of sorts—the box construction mixes Baltic birch plywood with a PVC coating; the driver design is part Mackie, part EAW and part RCF and the power comes from a blend of a Class AB amp for the highs and a class G amp with two power supplies for the lows. And

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SOUNDCHECK

The Gear:
Mackie SA1521 Powered Speakers

The Gigs:
Mid-sized club and outdoor private party

Who Its for:
Giggers used to a two-way system who want to go to a powered system

How Much: $1199

Pros:
- Good sound
- Built tough
- Easy to set up and use

Cons:
- Heavy
- I have to return them

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it's a good mix. The 1521 boasts an efficiency rating of 100dB and can put out a bruising 133dB SPL.

Mackie does not mix things up when it comes to ins and outs. While there are some powered cabs out there that integrate multiple inputs and EQ and can actually pass as mini mixers, the 1521s are totally straightforward. XLR ins and loop outs and a single volume control that moves between –15 and +5 dB with a detent point at 0dB plus LED indicators for power on, signal present, limit and thermal protect.

The cabs are built to take some abuse with their wood/resin combo construction plus heavy-duty cast aluminum handles on each side as well as the top and bottom to make 'em easier to move around. The front of the cab is covered with a heavy, weather resistant steel grill. Despite the fact that the manual says the 1521s are made to sit on the floor or on a stage, there are pole-mount cups on the top and bottom (we put them on standard speaker stands for one gig without any problems).

One last point before we move on to the gigs. Like the JBL/Crown team-up in the MPro system we reviewed a few months ago, Mackie has taken great advantage of its relationship with EAW and RCF to bring gigging-level powered speakers to a high-level power, punch and sonic precision. Kudos.

Our first outing with the 1521s was literally the day the truck dropped them off. In fact we didn't even take them out the boxes until we got to the gig. Upon unloading them we noticed that one of the front grills was dented. We're not sure if this happened during shipping or when we were unpacking them but a quick pull with a bent wire coat hanger pulled it right out.

This was a club gig with my eight-piece soul band. We usually run a system with powered tops and a passive sub but left the sub at home for this gig. I was a little worried about going back to a straight two-way system after going three-way for so long. We are a large band with some good-sized PA needs (we run three horns, four vocals, drums and keys through the main system at a minimum). For this gig we were also running guitar and bass through the mains. I was pleasantly surprised at the quality of the sound.

We happened to be recording that gig and a later listen to the tracks recorded with the room mics confirmed a definition in the mids that is unusual in a two-way 15 and horn system. At the last NAMM show the lead driver designer for RCF gave me an education on compression drivers that frankly went a bit over my head, but on this gig I heard the results of their design efforts and was plenty impressed.

With three-way systems, I generally prefer a 12" and horn cab coupled with a sub but the clarity of the 1521s might just convince me to use them as the basis of an extended system with one or two subs.

Our second gig was poolside at a private party on a very cold and slightly drizzly spring night. The 1521s were flat on the concrete deck for this one and despite the less than ideal placement and adverse conditions had no problems covering this outdoor gig for some 100-plus revelers.

The SA1521 is a well-built, properly powered, very good sounding cabinet that is ideal for those giggers used to a "standard" two-way 15" and horn setup. They incorporate the best of the powered speaker trends including electronic speaker control that would mean a big investment and likely a dedicated sound hound for most gigging bands. This kind of product will do nothing but lead to more sonic improvements from other manufacturers and even more cool new stuff in the powered speaker arena. A cool thing indeed. GIG

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